

Have You Met My Good Friend Lazarus?

This past month we've been looking at a prominent family in the New Testament – that of Mary, Martha and their brother Lazarus. Apart from the disciples themselves, if you were going to list those you might call friends of Jesus, I think these three people would likely end up on most lists. We read of Jesus being at their house, eating with them, spending time with them. He had great affection for these two sisters and their brother. It was with this family that he spent some of his final days prior to his crucifixion.

Turn with me to the gospel of John chapter 11. **John 11** We have talked about Martha and Mary and this morning I want to focus upon the person who is at the same time both the main character and playing something of a supporting role in this story. Lazarus is in some sense the main character. He is the one who grows sick, who dies, is buried and is finally raised from the dead. And yet at the same time, all of the drama is happening with the sisters, somewhere out in front of Lazarus who is already dead and buried. It is an interesting story.

I really just want to make some simple observations this morning about Lazarus. (We will come back to this story again after our missions convention.) As we look at Lazarus, keep in mind the impact that one family that knew Jesus could make. This was a real family. They weren't characters in a bible story, they were just three members of a family that met Jesus and before it was all over they had come to faith in him as their Messiah, Savior and Lord.

We've previously discussed the fact that when Lazarus became ill and died the sisters felt like all of us would feel – disappointed, saddened, confused as to why this happened and why Jesus didn't come. "Why didn't he heal our brother?" Yet from our vantage point we can see that Jesus trusted them, like God trusted Job, that they would not give up or lose their faith. Instead, Jesus trusted that they would still believe in him and because of that, he could work an even greater miracle than a temporary healing – he could raise Lazarus from the dead, reveal his glory as the victor over death and life, and bring eternal life to those who would believe.

Some would consider the raising of Lazarus as the greatest miracle in the gospels apart from the resurrection of Christ himself. Jesus had raised a widow's son,

but he had only just died. Lazarus had been dead and buried for four days. There was a superstition that the soul lingered around for two or three days, but four days, you were really dead. All dead. The truth is the raising of Lazarus was more significant in several ways.

1. The timing was significant. This happened just prior to the final Passover and his arrest and crucifixion. Consequently, this miracle was something of a tipping point. The Chief Priest called a meeting after this and said “We have to do something or everyone will believe in him as Messiah and the Romans will then come and crush us again.” This miracle accelerated their decision to kill Jesus or to arrange somehow for his death. The crowds were also beginning to gather in Jerusalem in preparation for the Passover and they heard what had happened. This miracle fed the events of Palm Sunday and the triumphal entry into Jerusalem.

2. The prominence of the family was significant. While the raising of the widow’s son in Luke 7 was miraculous, the family was obscure, unnamed. Mary, Martha and Lazarus were apparently prominent people in Bethany and in Jerusalem. The house was full of mourners when he died and news of his resurrection spread rapidly. It wasn’t just some obscure story, this was the resurrection of a leading citizen that scores of people knew.

3. The miracle itself was significant. As we stated earlier, there was no doubting this miracle. Lazarus had been dead and buried for four days. There was no trick to this. He was sick. He died. He was buried. Now he is alive again. Here we are 2,000 years later still talking about Lazarus and his sisters.

Jesus chose this miracle. He chose the timing of this. He arranged this. Mary and Martha sent word to him that Lazarus was sick and Jesus deliberately stayed where he was for a couple of days. He could have spoken the word and healed Lazarus without even making the trip. He healed the centurion’s servant that way, but Jesus chose to delay his arrival. Why? Here are a couple of suggestions as to why Jesus chose to arrange this miracle.

1. To convince his enemies and opponents that he really was God and Messiah.

Well, if that was the plan, it didn’t work too well, did it? While the bible says many of the Jews that had come to console Mary and Martha believed and put their trust in him,

others went to the enemies of Jesus to tell them what he had done (John 11:45-46). Instead of convincing his enemies, it made them more determined than ever to kill him.

2. To show his compassion and love for his friends. If he was going to do that, he would have just healed Lazarus in the first place, or better yet, he would have just kept him from ever getting sick to begin with. He certainly wouldn't have let his friends go through all of that pain and suffering and grieving over losing their brother if he loved them. Would he?

3. To reveal the glory of God. Here is the real reason for the miracle and for the delay. Yes it was a tipping point that accelerated the march toward the crucifixion and the fulfillment of God's redemption plan, but ultimately, it was about revealing the glory of God. Jesus delayed his coming to them so that the glory of God could be revealed. The outcome at the temporal level: Lazarus is resurrected and healed, but remember it's only temporary. Lazarus would die again and all the prayers didn't bring him back to life. But verse 45 says many of the Jews who were there believed and put their faith in Christ as Messiah, Savior and Lord. God's glory was certainly revealed in his power to raise Lazarus from the dead, but here is the greater outcome at an eternal level: Mary, Martha, Lazarus and many of the Jews believed upon Jesus and were transformed from the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of light.

Jesus told Martha, "Believe and you will see the glory of God." That is true for all who put their trust and faith in Christ. Believe today and you will see the glory of God revealed in his saving grace given to you.

Well, let's talk about Lazarus for a bit. It is an interesting thing, as prominent a place as Lazarus has as a friend of Jesus, in all of the gospel accounts Lazarus never speaks a word. Mary and Martha both speak, but not a word of Lazarus is ever recorded. Maybe it's because he had two sisters and he couldn't get a word in. **What do we know about Lazarus?**

1. Jesus loved him. That may be the most important thing we can say. The sisters, when they sent word to Jesus of his illness, referred to him as, "**the one you love.**" John 11:3. Verse 5 clearly states, "**Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus.**" Jesus loved Lazarus. They were friends. But notice this, being loved by Jesus doesn't exclude or exempt Lazarus from sickness or suffering. Being loved by Jesus didn't

exempt Mary and Martha from grieving the loss of their brother.

Sickness is a part of living on this sinful and fallen planet. I realize that some sickness we may bring upon ourselves through lifestyle choices, but just because you are sick doesn't mean you have sinned or that God is punishing you or is displeased with you or that he doesn't love you. Jesus loved Lazarus, yet Lazarus was sick. Those two things are not mutually exclusive. Charles Spurgeon wrote, "The love of Jesus does not separate us from the common necessities and infirmities of human life. Men of God are still men. The covenant of grace is not a charter of exemption from consumption, or rheumatism or asthma." The point is, if you are feeling condemned because of illness in your life or a member of your family, remember that Jesus loved Lazarus but Lazarus got sick. Jesus loved Mary and Martha but it didn't exempt them from the grief and the pain of watching their brother die. When we give ourselves to Jesus and tell him that we want to serve him, when we surrender to him and his will for our lives, he takes us at our word. At our invitation and upon our believing and trusting in him, he will allow his glory to be revealed through us and our circumstances. Just bear in mind that might result in some painful or challenging situations along the way but that ultimately his glory will be revealed in us and through our circumstances – and friends, that is our highest purpose. That's what it's all about.

I wonder if Lazarus and his sisters might have said to Jesus one day, "Lord, we believe you are sent from God. If there is anything we can ever do, any way you can use us to help reveal your glory to others, we would be honored to help. Feel free to use us any way you can." And Jesus took them at their word.

Let me add too, Mary and Martha certainly did the right thing when they sent word to Jesus that Lazarus was sick. It is a lesson for all of us to call upon the Lord in times of sickness and trouble with that confidence and faith that he will hear and he will answer.

It is interesting to me that the word the sisters sent to Jesus said "the one you love is sick" rather than, "the one who loves you is sick." Does it matter? I think it might. You see the one fact that everything hinges on is that Jesus loved Lazarus. The basis of their appeal for help and healing was that Jesus loved them and his love is unconditional and perfect and steadfast. John reminds us in his epistle that "we love

God because he first loved us.” 1 John 4:19. It’s his love that makes the difference for us.

You see, if they had appealed on the basis of Lazarus’ love for Jesus, then when Jesus delayed his coming, they could have begun to wonder, “Maybe Lazarus didn’t love him enough. Maybe we didn’t love him enough. Maybe we failed to show him our love or to show him our faith. Has our love been pure enough? Devoted enough? Was it good enough?” Those questions begin to throw us all into self-doubt because the answer is “No, we probably didn’t love him enough or have enough faith or trust in him. No our love was probably not as pure as it should have been because compared to his love for us we will never love him enough.” But that was not the basis of their appeal. **They appealed to Jesus on the basis of His love for Lazarus!**

He loved them when they weren’t lovable. He loved them when Martha was choosing the wrong thing and neglecting time with him. He loved them when Mary was likely neglecting her responsibility in the kitchen. He loved them even when they expressed doubt. He loved them even when their faith was wavering and they protested about removing the stone at the tomb. It didn’t hinge upon the measure of their love for him, the basis of their appeal to Jesus and the miracle that followed all was based upon his great love for Mary, Martha and Lazarus. That’s what we know about Lazarus. Jesus loved him. And Jesus loves us. His love is the basis for our appeal as well. Don’t start questioning as to whether you love Jesus enough to ask him for his help. Ask him because he still loves you, in spite of who you are.

2. Lazarus was an effective witness. I mentioned that the gospels don’t record a single word that Lazarus ever spoke, but look at what John’s gospel says. **“Meanwhile a large crowd of Jews found out that Jesus was there and came, not only because of him but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. So the chief priests made plans to kill Lazarus as well, for on account of him many of the Jews were going over to Jesus and putting their faith in him.” John 12:9-11.**

Lazarus never spoke a word that was recorded in Scripture, but his life, his witness, his willingness to allow Jesus to use him to reveal the glory of God to others, that ultimately brought scores of people to salvation and faith in Christ. It was St. Francis who said to “preach the gospel at all times and when necessary, use words.” Lazarus

was preaching the gospel at all times. He didn't have to use words. His life made the difference. His life was the testimony. May we be as effective a witness through our life as Lazarus was through his.

3. Lazarus was identified as being with Jesus. Look at John 12. **“Six days before the Passover, Jesus arrived at Bethany, where Lazarus lived, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. Here a dinner was given in Jesus' honor. Martha served, while Lazarus was among those reclining at the table with him.” John 12:1-2.**

Lazarus was with Jesus and was not afraid or ashamed to be seen with him or to be counted as one of his followers. Keep in mind that being with Jesus was kind of a risky proposition at that time. John tells us in 11:53, **“So from that day on they plotted to take his life. Therefore Jesus no longer moved about publicly among the Jews. Instead he withdrew to a region near the desert.” John 11:53**

Lazarus was with Jesus and wasn't afraid to be counted among his friends. I know, you say, “of course he would be with him, after all, Jesus raised him from the dead.” But the truth is, although we haven't been physically resurrected from the dead, the bible says that all of us spiritually speaking are dead in our trespasses and sins but when we repent of our sins and believe upon Christ as our Savior and Lord, we are made alive in him. If you have repented and believed upon Christ, that he died on the cross as the sacrifice that atoned for your sins and that he rose again, then you have been spiritually resurrected to live a new life in Christ. You have been brought from spiritual death to spiritual life in Christ. Does your life give evidence of that resurrection? Are you ashamed to be recognized as being with Jesus, being a follower of Christ? Are you willing to openly admit that you love Jesus and you are his servant as Lazarus did?

Understand that there is a cost involved. Not everyone will like your devotion to Christ. The bible says, **“So the chief priests made plans to kill Lazarus as well, for on account of him many of the Jews were going over to Jesus and putting their faith in him.” John 12:10-11.**

Lazarus was being threatened because of his relationship with Jesus. The same may happen to you as you walk with him. If we identify with him we will likely suffer with him. Paul said we share in his sufferings but we will also share in the power and glory

of his resurrection.

Lazarus, by his godly life and testimony, by his presence in the community, was responsible for many coming to faith in Christ. It is possible to say little and still have your life speak volumes in terms of testifying for Christ. Make sure you are living a life that pleases God and let others see the ready evidence of Christ in your life and in your actions.

As I prayed about this message and worked on it, I realized that some of you here this morning may be like Lazarus in that you need a resurrection. Everything about your life spiritually speaking seems sick or dying or maybe even dead and buried. You need a resurrection. You need to come to Christ in faith and commit your life to him. Repent of your sins, those bad choices, ask him to forgive you and stop running away from him. Come to Jesus and find life in him. He will bring you from death to new life, eternal life if you will come to him.

Some of you may be realizing that like Lazarus, it's time to publicly identify yourself as being one who is with Jesus. It's time to align yourself with him and his will for your life. I think Lazarus sitting at the table with Jesus in spite of the risk is just another sign of his commitment and devotion to Jesus. "I'm with you Jesus, regardless of who comes or goes, regardless of judgment or opinion, my life is given to you. Blessing or suffering, living or dying, whatever comes, I belong to you." It's time to take a stand for Jesus and live that life before others.

Finally, some of you may just need to know that like Lazarus, you are one that Jesus loves. Maybe you've never heard it, never believed it, never could let yourself believe it, but today you are starting to accept it and be blessed by it. I think you may need to come to him with that same appeal that Mary and Martha sent to Jesus, and just insert your name there. "Lord, Phil, the one you love is sick. Lord, Paula, the one you love is sick...." He loves you and he has something glorious in store for you. It is his plan to reveal the glory of God in and through your life. Trust him. Receive his love. Rest in his love for you today and know that on the basis of his love for you, you can ask for his help and know that he will cause all things to work together for good in your life.

It's not on the basis of how much you love Jesus, the thing that makes all the

difference for you is how much he loves you. He loves you. He is here to heal you, to help you, to save you, to guide you, to deliver you, to provide for you. Turn your life to him.

If you need a resurrection in your life, I invite you to come. If you need to surrender your life to him and identify with him, I invite you to come. If you need to know that he loves you or if you need healing or some miracle and you are ready to come saying "Lord, the one you love is sick and I need you to heal me." Then come on. Jesus loves you and he has good things in store for you.